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STATE FOR EUR/WE, ISN, S/GC, AND AF/C

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR BELGIAN DEFENSE MINISTER PIETER DE
CREM'S DECEMBER 15-16 MEETINGS WITH SECDEF, DOS AND
CONGRESS IN WASHINGTON

REF: A. BRUSSELS 1498

[1](#)B. BRUSSELS 1493

Classified By: Ambassador Howard Gutman, reason 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Belgian Defense Minister Pieter De Crem has been in office since March 2008 and is one of the United States' strongest friends in the Belgian government. Under his leadership, Belgium has returned its focus to NATO as the orienting factor in its defense policy. Now, Belgium is poised to take a leading role in Europe -- the former Prime Minister, Herman Van Rompuy, has just been named as the first European Council President under the new circumstances of the Lisbon Treaty, and the Belgian government is preparing itself to hold the rotating presidency of the EU Council for the six months beginning July 1, 2010. Embassy Brussels believes that properly motivated, Belgium and its government, including De Crem, can be leaders in mobilizing Europe to assist the United States in meeting two of the key challenges faced by the Transatlantic community -- Afghanistan and Guantanamo. The Embassy has thus urged in repeated meetings with the Prime Minister, the Defense Minister and the Foreign Minister to become more vocal in calling for Europe to ally in its support for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and in European joint efforts in closing Guantanamo. Hopefully, neither coalition politics nor long-simmering tensions between the Flemish and francophone regions and linguistic communities will not distract Belgium from this opportunity. Other opportunities for cooperation exist on Africa policy, nuclear disarmament in Europe and Iran. End Summary.

TAKING A LEADERSHIP ROLE IN EUROPE

[1](#)2. (C) For the past few months, Embassy Brussels has been working to set the stage for a change in Belgium's self-concept as a small, meek country living in the shadow of France and Germany, to a country that can show leadership in Europe in spite of stretched financial and material resources, mainly by becoming more vocal on the need for Europe to support America's new Afghanistan strategy and to assist in the closing of the Guantanamo detention center. This is a theme the Ambassador has been stressing to De Crem in Brussels. De Crem's visit to Washington is a chance for DOD, DOS and Congressional officials to forge a closer personal relationship with De Crem and to foster and encourage this transformation. In fact, of course, the transformation began at home in Belgium in March 2008 when a new government, made up of a motley coalition of Christian Democrats, Socialists, Liberals and Humanists from both sides of the linguistic border, came to power. The Prime Minister

then, and now again with the departure of Van Rompuy to the EU, was Yves Leterme, a Flemish Christian Democrat. Formation of the government was delayed for nearly a year because of difficult issues of power-sharing between the French and Flemish communities, many of which still remain to be solved.

STEPPING UP IN AFGHANISTAN

13. (C) Nevertheless, the new Defense Minister, Pieter De Crem, with sometimes grudging support from Leterme and others in the cabinet, reoriented Belgium's defense policy. Where his predecessor had promoted a mainly humanitarian, EU and UN support role for the Belgian military, De Crem sought to re-establish Belgium as a small but reliable NATO ally. As a result, Belgium's troop commitment to NATO ISAF operations in Afghanistan has increased from about 250 troops to nearly 540, with further increases, perhaps to 680, in the offing. Belgians provide security for Kabul airport, operate and maintain six F-16's in Kandahar, run one Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team in Kunduz with a second due to arrive in January, and participate in a German-run PRT. This increase has been achieved against a background of declining resources which have required a thoroughgoing restructuring of the armed forces and recall of peacekeeping troops in Kosovo and Lebanon. The government has also bucked critics inside and out of government who prefer a more pacifist, less NATO-oriented approach and are ever ready to make political hay out of possible casualties. Minister De Crem moreover has reacted positively to suggestions from the Ambassador that he become more vocal in his support of America's Afghanistan strategy as a way to help shore up the support of other European partners. Belgium deserves appreciation and praise for its efforts. Further increases in military

contributions to Afghanistan will occur, but Belgian military resources are reaching their limits.

14. (C) De Crem stands up well to criticism he receives for the government's Afghanistan policy from the main opposition party, the Flemish Socialists (Sp.a), which is small but vocal, as well as some individual members of Parliament from other parties. The Sp.a's leader, Dirk Van Der Maelen, has termed Belgium's participation in ISAF "stupid and costly". De Crem's response: "Belgium is not an island in the middle of the ocean and the international community counts on our country when it comes to operations abroad." De Crem has otherwise vigorously defended the ISAF mission and Belgium's role in it, both in the Belgian press and on the floor of the Belgian Parliament.

15. (S) De Crem played a critical role during the recent NATO Ministerial and Secretary Clinton meetings in behind-the-scenes calls and contacts. In order to help him advance Afghanistan policy within the Belgian government, he provided the Ambassador with three specific requests which the Secretary could make to Prime Minister Leterme. These were to extend the Belgian deployment until 2011, add another 20% to the Belgian deployment (the Secretary requested an additional 150 troops), and add a substantial police trainer presence. The Secretary made all three requests of Leterme. Having the requests come from the Secretary will help the government move to adopting the three policies and overcome opposition within the government coalition.

16. (C) On the other hand, Belgium's contributions to civilian development in Afghanistan have not kept pace. This responsibility and authority does not rest with Minister de Crem, but with Belgian Interior Minister Turtleboom. In April 2009, the GOB announced that it was doubling its financial assistance to the country to 12 million euros a year. This figure is only about 0.75 percent of its global budget for official development assistance. After hesitating for more than a year because of security concerns, the government has finally decided to send 2-4 police trainers and a magistrate to Afghanistan. De Crem's colleague and

Minister of Development Cooperation, Charles Michel, has said that Belgium will increase its assistance to Afghanistan but only with sufficient "advance guarantees from the Karzai administration of good governance and the fight against corruption." Although De Crem has direct influence only over the military, he participates in cabinet discussions of other issues, including development assistance. He has always fought for greater civilian assistance but further urging of more civilian assistance to Afghanistan with Minister De Crem may help equip him in his effort to increase civilian resources devoted to Afghanistan as well as military.

SPURRING ON CLOSURE OF GUANTANAMO

17. (C) Again, although De Crem has no direct authority to order resettlement of Guantanamo detainees, his support in the matter will be helpful. In general, the Embassy has been encouraging Belgium to take a leadership role in Europe in the closure of the Guantanamo detention center by being more vocal in urging Europe to work together to bring about the closure now. In October, Belgium resettled one detainee. We are discussing the transfer of two Tunisian detainees who have already been convicted of crimes in Belgium, not as part of the "placement" of detainees, but instead as part of our Department of Justice ongoing cooperation with the Belgian Ministry of Justice. Our hope is that that process will make it easier for Belgian society to accept the return, and also allow us to ask the Ministry of Foreign Affairs separately to take others. We have also begun to suggest the possibility of Belgium stepping forward from the chorus line and up to the footlights on Guantanamo. Helping solve the USG's -- and Europe's -- problem with Guantanamo is a low-cost way for Belgium to attain prominence in Europe. There are signs that Belgium's reticence is beginning to chafe its leadership. Complaints about Belgium's exclusion from G-20 membership, and opposition to perceived influence of a "directoire" of large countries in the EU are examples. It is a matter of convincing Belgium that not only does it have self-interest in a more assertive role, but it also has a uniquely trusted character within Europe that permits it to be effective. Embassy Brussels suggests the time is right to ask Belgium to take more than a handful of detainees and ask in coordination with others (as led by Belgium), so that Guantanamo -- which Europeans always so roundly condemned -- is closed once and

for all.

ENHANCED MILITARY AND CIVILIAN AFRICA COOPERATION

18. (C) Central Africa is a special interest of Belgium, as the former colonial power in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Burundi. Belgian soldiers are training Benin troops that participate in MONUC in the Congo, and some Congolese troops as well. Belgium is negotiating in the EU, over the reluctance of the French, to take leadership of the EU's Atalanta anti-piracy mission off the coast of Somalia in the second half of 2010. It has agreed to provide a ship to the U.S.-led Africa Partnership Station, which conducts internationally staffed, ship-based training missions in West Africa. A Belgian officer will soon be embedded at AFRICOM headquarters in Stuttgart. The GOB is eager to cooperate with the United States on encouraging security sector reform in the DRC, consolidating peace in the Eastern DRC, promoting regional economic integration and cooperation among states in the region on security issues. In particular, Belgium is as interested in preventing sexual violence as we are. It would like us to encourage continued cooperation between Rwanda and the DRC to take a firmer hand with rebel groups that operate in Eastern Congo and far too often commit atrocities. In November, Belgium announced an increase in assistance to Burundi, making it the largest bilateral donor to that country. It plans to do the same for the DRC.

MULTILATERAL APPROACH TO EUROPEAN DISARMAMENT

¶9. (S) Belgium has a special interest in nuclear non-proliferation issues because it participates in NATO's nuclear forces at the Kleine Brogel air force base. It rejected a recent overture from Germany to join with the Netherlands, Italy and Germany to propose to the rest of NATO that nuclear weapons be removed from those countries (ref B).

However, Belgian MOD and MFA officials apparently had to rein in then-Foreign Minister and now Prime Minister Leterme when he initially responded too positively to the idea. Belgium's official policy rejects a unilateral approach to disarmament and insists that the issue must be discussed among all NATO members at one time, with due regard for U.S.-Russian bilateral discussions and the NPT. The government is also opposing a proposal from the floor of the Belgian parliament to ban nuclear weapons from Belgian soil.

IRAN SANCTIONS IF NECESSARY

¶10. (C) Belgium shares our concern about Iranian efforts to develop a nuclear capability. It supports strengthened sanctions in the EU and UN if necessary. In that case, at least at first, it prefers to see existing sanctions made more effective, rather than extending them into entirely new areas, with the possible exception of a conventional arms embargo.

POLITICAL PITFALLS IN REGIONAL TENSIONS

¶11. (C) With three regions, three linguistic communities, seven parliaments and a myriad of political parties, domestic politics and the division of powers in Belgium require a complicated and delicate series of compromises. Herman Van Rompuy, though Flemish, was one politician who seemed able to gain the confidence and trust of both Flemish and francophone Belgians. His successor, Yves Leterme, is more identifiably Flemish and does not share that reputation. One difficult issue, Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, or BHV, symbolizes the divisions and carries unusual emotional power in Belgium (ref A). In essence, it is a question of whether residents of the Brussels suburbs should live and vote under Flemish control or have special francophone voting and social rights. The issue impeded formation of a government after the 2007 elections and was kicked down the road ever since. A special effort will have to be made before March 2010 to either once again delay a solution or reach a final compromise. Failure to do so could threaten Leterme's coalition in the first part of the year. The fact that all Belgian politicians dearly want to avoid embarrassment during Belgium's EU presidency will motivate them to find the necessary compromises, but there is no guarantee they can.

GUTMAN